



What Difficult Students Desperately Need, But Rarely Get

No, it's not attention.

For the most part difficult students are given far too much attention.

Learning **how to spend less time on difficult students** will do both you and them an ocean of good. In fact, it's among the critical first steps to restoring their dignity and common pride in being a regular, contributing member of your classroom.

No, what your most challenging students need most is **your honest feedback**. They need you to tell them the truth about their successes and failures. They need you to look them in the eye with compassion and tell them like it is – warts and all.

Most difficult students are subjected to a baffling combination of false praise and angry criticism. Teachers volley between the two like Federer and Nadal. And neither provides the feedback these students need to understand how they're really doing.

So they flounder about, misinformed, pinning their future on an inaccurate picture of what it takes to succeed in school and the wider world.

On the one hand, they're gratuitously praised for what are common expectations. They're told they did a "great job" because they sat quietly

during a lesson. They're given a "way to go" for *not* hitting or pushing at recess. They get prizes and accolades and awards for doing what they're supposed to do, for accomplishing the barest, low-bar minimum.

On the other hand, they're often harshly and personally criticized for their mistakes. They're given umpteen lectures, scoldings, and reprimands that leave them defensive and resentful and unable to see even a kernel of truth to the criticisms.

They're left floating in a sea of faulty mixed signals, tossed about by flattery and disparagement. Are they wonderful and special because they can go an entire morning without being sent to time-out, or are they unlikable and worthy of scorn because they can't?

They are neither, of course. Yet these are the predominant messages they hear about themselves day after day, year upon year.

The Gift Of Truth

The only way difficult students can begin climbing out of the hole they've dug themselves is to know how deep the hole is.

They need someone to step forward and consistently reflect for them how they're *really* doing. They need the one thing, the one precious gift, that will show them the way up and out of the hole and standing on their own two feet.

They need the truth, spoken and unspoken.

The unspoken truth is **your fair and consistent classroom management plan**. Its action-based accountability clearly communicates that their behavior has strayed from the habits necessary for success in school.

And because it isn't personal or hurtful, it's a truth that gets through, that's taken to heart, that points the finger of responsibility directly and solely at them.

As much as possible, let your plan do your talking for you. If, however, you feel the occasion to address a student individually, your words should be spoken plainly and calmly and only in those rare moments when a phrase or two can make the truth more impactful.

"That isn't good enough."

"You're just not making it right now."

"You're better than that."

Then turn and walk away. Let the truth do its good work. Give your students an opportunity to self-examine and ponder and feel remorse all on their own. Let them make a promise to themselves to do better.

And when they do well? Saying nothing at all is often the most truthful and powerful way you can respond – because it communicates loud and clear that right behavior and attentive habits are expected and not worthy of special recognition.

An honest word or two, though, or **a heartfelt, non-verbal gesture**, based not on temporary improvement, but on real change in behavior, can mean

the world to them. It's a simple acknowledgement that you notice and approve.

Think of your most difficult students and the scores of conflicting, untruthful, and unreliable messages they've been given over the years. Surely it reaches into the thousands. Decide right now to restore this false picture to the original, imperfect, and beautiful masterpiece that it is.

Give them the gift of truth and nothing but. For it is the one thing that can pull them off the dizzying roller coaster ride of false praise and harsh criticism.

And place them firmly on solid ground.